Case Study 1.2: Material Traces of Piercing and Bundling in the Ḥaram al-Sharīf Corpus

Anna Steffen

The material traces of bundling records, such as the holes for strings found in the Ḥaram al-Sharīf documents, offer insight into how written artefacts were physically grouped in the medieval Arabic Middle East. Piercing and stringing documents together served multiple archival functions: safeguarding materials for storage, consolidating dossiers of thematically or procedurally linked records, keeping sequences orderly, or creating filing structures that allowed for additional items to be added over time.

The Ḥaram al-Sharīf corpus, a collection of over nine hundred administrative and judicial records primarily from fourteenth-century Jerusalem, provides extensive evidence of these archival practices. Filing documents in strung groups was fundamental to systematic preservation. Archival holes found throughout the corpus serve as physical remnants of past bundling configurations. By matching their patterns we can reconstruct dissolved bundles, identify serial files, and better understand the logic of smaller archival units within the Ḥaram subcorpora.

The documentary subcorpus in the Ḥaram al-Sharīf corpus linked to the financial officer Muḥammad al-Khillāʿī provides a particularly instructive example of how material traces allow us to reconstruct how paperwork was physically grouped for preservation. Al-Khillāʿī served as a financial officer for several administrative bodies in fourteenth-century Jerusalem, including the treasury, inheritance office, and postal service. In this capacity, he appears to have employed a systematic method of document preservation. He grouped records thematically and chronologically, pierced them with up to seven archival holes for stringing, and aggregated them into separate bundles. Four documents originating from his office (nos 770.1, 770.2, 770.6, 770.7) each feature four matching holes, arranged in a trapezoidal pattern. These perforations are remnants of a bundling technique that involved folding the paper multiple times and piercing once through the folded stack to bind items together. Issued within days of one another in September 1391, the four documents relate to income and expenditure from estate liquidations and seems to have been strung together as a single preserved unit. They functioned as receipts substantiating three near-identical accounting records covering the same month (no. 059, no. 374, and no. 535), which were also produced by al-Khillāʿī's office.[1] The accounting records were not bundled with the receipts. Two, one likely a draft of the other, were strung together, whereas the third bears a different perforation pattern and was preserved separately. In this case, the archival holes indicate how a financial officer in fourteenth-century Jerusalem differentiated between record types, preserving receipts covering one month's revenue and expenditure in a coherent bundle, while filing the corresponding accounting records separately. This contrast provides material evidence that distinct bundles were maintained in parallel, with records deliberately separated by documentary function. Reconstructing document clusters through bundling traces enables us to understand how archival cohesion was materially enacted and maintained.

1 Müller 2013, 446.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111656014-004

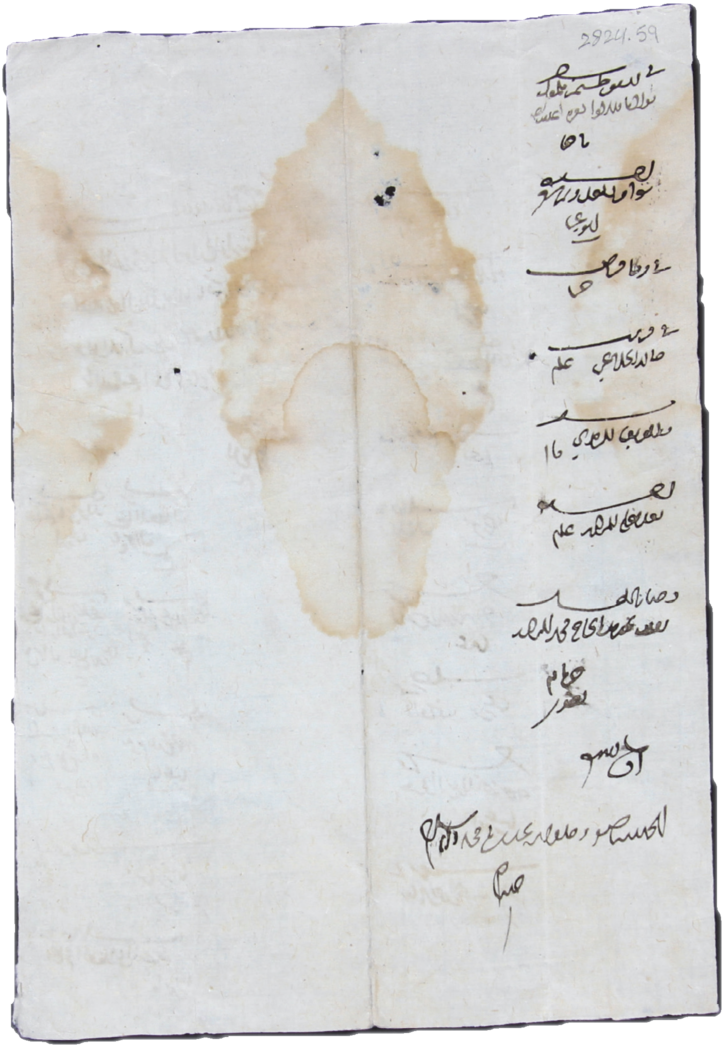

Fig. 1: This accounting record from Shawwāl/September 1391 CE displays two archival holes to the left and right of the central fold in the upper third of the document; Jerusalem, Islamic Museum, Ḥaram al-Sharīf Document, no. 059 (verso); © Mohammad H. Ghosheh.

References

Müller, Christian (2013), *Der Kadi und seine Zeugen: Studie der mamlukischen Ḥaram-Dokumente aus Jerusalem*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.